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ABSTRACT

The author discusses "troubled" or "emotionally charged" children in terms of causes of maladaptive behavior and techniques which teachers can use to positively modify student behaviors. Characteristics of the troubled youngsters, such as social immaturity, are pointed out. Outlined are six methods for promoting social adaptation and academic achievement including fostering warmth in the classroom and providing opportunities for tension reduction. (LS)

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THE TROUBLED YOUNGSTER IN THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction:

The purpose of this article is to provide educators and teachers of students who are too emotionally charged to adjust consistently to regular classroom procedures, with some specific causes of their students' maladaptive behavior, and some techniques to ameliorate both the students' receptivity to learning, as well as teacher satisfaction of doing a job well. No panacea is predicted; but these suggestions have with consistent application caused positive modification in student behaviors. For purposes of this paper the "emotionally charged" student can better be described as a "troubled" individual.

Who is The Troubled Youngster

The troubled youngster is a person in conflict. His learning proceeds in an erratic manner. He presents blocks to learning in one or more subject areas, or, he does not learn as readily or capably as his potential indicates. In the majority of cases, psychometric assessment indicates that he is not retarded mentally. Rather he is momentarily socially retarded. Strong emotions serve to temporarily block interest in school, learning or obeying instructions. These emotions for the most part unconsciously mobilize persistent anxiety and or recurring fears of falling apart or being totally inadequate, that blot out his interest in, and use of his ability to perform required tasks.

Such a troubled youngster is a constant challenge to himself first, his peers second, and in the eyes of his teacher an anathema. The troubled youngster, therefore, becomes troublesome to himself, peers and teachers. "Teaching the troubled child is an art — like a sculptor, we must know just how and where to chip the marble if we are to release a figure from it." (p 145, 3) Teachers of these troubled and troublesome youngsters must possess the adept sensitivity and attuneness of musical instruments, to reach and educate them. When this human sensitivity remains relatively suppressed, the teacher's prime reactions are, "the youngster does not listen", "he interrupts", "I can't have him in my class." These indictments seem to infer that the troubled youngster is not teachable in an ordinary classroom, is not amenable to teaching en masse, and function or get along as well as expected for the most part with others. This youngster has very special needs, therefore.

Teachers, next to parents, have the most significant impact on the life of a youngster. Their maternal feeling frequently enables them to cope with difficult traits or disharmony with a gentleness possible only with one's own children, regardless of cultural heritage or class. Above all, many are "empathetic and tolerant, ingenious and willing to depart from traditional approaches" (6), when individual differences and needs dictate.

Knowing what the youngster's home circumstances are, is important if his school's personnel are to appropriately interpret and relate to the youngster's behavior; and more so, it is important that parents feel that the school shares the mutual responsibility for their children. It is not unusual to find that the troubled youngster comes from a troubled, or emotionally and socially deficient

family. As such he is starved for affection - for the recognition and the attention accompanying it. He acts younger than his age therefore. Socially immature. Regressed. Animal — like in aggressiveness. Given the attention he craves, he is only momentarily filled, relieved. As his self-consciousness about his immaturity and his marked need for attention mobilize discomforting anxiety, he attacks other students and/or teacher verbally, talking out of turn, disturbing the class; or, nonverbally, - walking about, tapping or banging furniture. These behaviors partially serve as mechanisms to defend himself against expected attack, and also to invite attack (punishment, disapproval) to crystallize the unacceptability of his immature, inadequate self-concept. He frequently feels inadequate, inferior to other children, unlovable to teacher, to parents; he could also hate himself.

Only when he feels better about himself can he act appropriately in class, with peers, or function academically in accordance with his potential. Winning praise and attention for use of his abilities from teachers, peers and other school personnel, become a positive motivational force. Recognition as worthwhile, that there are advantages to acting like the older boy he is, results in decrease in his self-consciousness. A drop in his anxiety level sees him no longer needing motoric discharge by walking around the classroom, or disrupting instruction. With the attention that recommended remedial programs provide him, and the love and concern experienced from his teachers, academic tasks gradually cease to be approached with the fear of failure which made it impossible to function adequately, previously. Small successes that accrue, gain him status and recognition within the family as well. Home and family are experienced differently as his reports reflect passing grades, and decrease of disciplinary comments or actions.

The major methods that culminate in successful gradual social adaptation and adequate academic achievement in the school can be articulated as follows:

1. Creation by teachers of a sense of belonging ess in the group.

How? By consistent expression of love and acceptance that overcome the fear of inadequacy of competing with others. At times this may be done by assigning him responsibilities, which the teacher's observations have pinpointed as indices of ability. This fosters a sense of participation and belonging.

2. Fostering warmth in the classroom.

Fostering a classroom atmosphere that combines understanding and compassion, firmness and kindness. Not only the physical plant, but the emotional climate in which instruction is imparted for the most part is portentious of whether learning proceeds, or, blocks to learning are erected.

How? In many cases, the friendly help — going over kindly, non-threateningly to a troublesome youngster, reassures him against the loss of his self-control. In the absence of the usual implied or expressed reproach or ejection from the class, the emotional impact of the teacher's proximity breaks down the student's defenses, and facilitates his gradual participation in the tasks at hand.

In the case of the youngster who disturbs the class by talking out of turn aimlessly, frequently, the teacher may for example say, "Donald, you will be called upon to answer during this morning's exercise, pay attention, so that you can answer when you are called upon, — (pause) is that clear Donald? — alright, other members of the class will also be called upon. Donald, remember, you are only to talk when you are called upon or when the class is given permission to share ideas."

In this statement the teacher gives recognition to Donald, encourages his participation at a particular time, sets anticipatory incentives and reward systems for responding, and also sets up a system of consistency not biased against him, but for all members of the class — "talk when called upon." Now, suppose Donald looks around the classroom, or goes over to the window — what should the teacher do? Ignore this particular behavior, momentarily. Focus on the fact that Donald is not disturbing the class by talking out of turn. She may find the walking, tending towards disruption of the class, an opportune moment for invoking the question — response requirement of Donald, thus also reducing the disturbing trend his walking could produce. At all times, providing there is no physical attack on others, the focus of the teacher ought to be on the rule — "no talking until permitted." The occurrence of subsequent, and irrelevant behaviors is Donald's way of adapting to the change involved in following the new rules — he is testing out the consistency pattern of the teacher. Is she going to provide a series of "don'ts", and "not do's" to restrict him totally? The type of experience Donald has with his teacher will determine the degree of testing out. The less consistent the teacher the more extreme and longer the testing out. When Donald has learned to abide by rule one, only then, after several episodes of testing out of the limits, and final total acquiescence should rule two be effectuated. Another way of reinforcing rule consistency is by asking Donald to restate the rule.

It is important that children learn that the teacher is consistent, first by acceding to the consistent expectation of carrying through one rule, then when the one rule has been established, the second, necessary rule can be enforced.

According to Smith and Smith (4), "every rule changes a child's environment. It is very hard

for him to get used to one change — to get used to several changes might well be overwhelming for him." (ibid p 56) (5).

3. Providing opportunities for tension reduction.

Many troubled and troublesome youths have a very low level of frustration tolerance; they feel like captives, or caged animals; and like these, their impulses, and the anxieties attendant upon these feelings and impulses impel them to talk, to walk around, to disturb, to disrupt the equilibrium of the class, — to feel able, or to cope with the disequilibrium their "captivity" impinges on them. Such acting out releases for them the tension which they could thinly veil for long; the release permits them to feel at peace with themselves — though it causes disequilibrium for others. It seems to exemplify the Lucretian aphorism — "What is food to one man, may be fierce poison to others." (Lucretius) (2).

Therefore, it is suggested that these troubled youngsters ought to be unobtrusively permitted relief time to go to the Guidance Office, not as punishment or in embarrassment, but with cognizance of their low tolerance for frustration and the need to provide relief during pressured classroom activities, rather than remain restrained, and therefore too impelled to act out.

At such release times — guidance counseling could include talking in an atmosphere of emotional support and planned supportive activities. It might also be most appropriate that guidance services initiate brief five minute interview — relief sessions with identified troubled, disruptive students, to forestall acting out. The effectiveness of these sessions in reducing disruptions in the classroom can also be studied by comparing incidences of disruptive behavior in

classrooms where troubled youths are left captive — and without relief, with similar incidences in classrooms where youths are given brief five minute relief counseling and support.

4. Constructing a program out of respect for, and based upon, the troubled student's strong points.

How? All youngsters thrive on praise and actively seek the recognition and self-esteem that emanate from approval. Increased self-esteem, leads to greater feelings of self-worth, and new self-image. An increase in motivation accompanies these positive aspects of his ego. Small successes lead to more frequent and larger successes, with concomitant frequencies in approval.

Every youth has some skill or talent; — for one, it may be drawing, for another singing, or basketball and the like. This attribute is the youngster's chance for leadership, through deserved recognition. All teachers must look for, identify and use positive attributes in youngsters to constructively reinforce their adequate self-image, and promote long term positive attitudes toward learning and responsibility taking.

5. Closely related to the positive attributes, is the use of a teaching methodology relevant to the troubled youngster's interests.

The way this can be done, for example, is by using practical real life situations that bear relevance to the troubled youngster's life circumstances and experiences. It calls for that type of communication that removes barriers to understanding and fosters feedback of a positive, reinforcing sort. This decoding/encoding process can best be effectuated by simulating the vernacular of the student, accepting his expressions, and rephrasing the latter in the instructor's least complex formulation. Where concrete representational formulations can explain an abstract concept the former is preferable as a

starting point. The use of the journey to school as a point of departure for instruction about wind velocity and/or temperature; the class members and their seating arrangements, to introduce behavioral interaction; push and pull forces operating on objects or people are among a few of the interests which can be empathized with by the troubled youth, and that can be used to initiate participation, sustain learning and growth.

6. Using discipline in the classroom to promote individual growth, not to restore order. Immediate attention in the here and now must be shown to misbehavior.

To do this the youngster needs to be clearly told what he has done wrong, — what is wrong about it and the probable reasons why he might have done it, in a nonaccusatory, positive tone. Since this behavior occurred in the group atmosphere of the classroom, the other class members can benefit from an explanation as to the probable reasons why the troubled child misbehaved. The underlying rationale here is that when individuals are given an explanation for the emotional response of another, which is understandable more so when they are the audience, the likelihood of their group's replication or imitation is significantly reduced. Also, when sanctions are imposed, action and consequence are associated, and the consequence of removal from class (if necessary) for example, will not be seen as unfair, but as stemming from the teacher's concern for the student and genuine interest in educating him by limiting the degree of freedom of behavior within the classroom, to those that meet the desirable standards agreed upon by all.

The troubled youth undoubtedly is the product of a socially and emotionally deficient family. He has grown up in a family, whose social situa-

tion has afforded him meager opportunities to learn to think before acting, and to anticipate consequences; and whose communications are for the most part based on concrete or material communication of love, and regard for his person. Such youths relate more to immediate gratification. The delayal, typical of more abstract problem solving and sorting, they eschew, because these demand that they establish long lasting meaningful relationships which they cannot tolerate at this time. Society and the school community react to these youths with the same impulsivity that they perpetuate, that is, concrete externally imposed punishment, imprisonment, ejection, suspensions, ostracism, criticisms, with all of the replication of earlier rejections and deprivations which have been at the core of their earliest deficiencies, and intensify their resistances to meaningful learning, growth and social adaptation.

In the case of the school, ejection is preceded often by moral exhortation, and making of the individual a personal, and social or moral example. The latter is in contrast to the psychodynamic principles of constructive integration of the whole individual, by promoting situations to permit the youth to use his own internal resources and be guided, not forced or coerced, and supported in growth in his inner life, to mature as a more social being. Such psychodynamic approach helps the youth to become "capable of responding to communication about, and developing an awareness of such abstract values as personal morality and social responsibility", that the society of the school demands. The effectiveness of the school society in the use of punitive measures, whether by deprivation of human rights, liberties or material sanctions, depends more on the inculcation within the individual of the abstract understanding of the social necessity underlying the punishment. The understanding of the abstraction

can only be accomplished when the troubled youngster first possesses the capacity to appreciate abstract verbal levels of communication. The raison d'etre for social punishment can only be understood when the above conditions are met, and the meaningfulness, and effectiveness of the social sanctions experienced.

The purpose of social sanctions in schools and other institutions of our society is to foster social adaptation. However, social processes according to Ackerman, a noted Family Therapist, (1) cannot be isolated from the youth's personality. The latter has its inner self and outer self; in the school, the outer self assumes the role of the student — that must change in response to the social conditions of the school — as a conforming, social being. The troubled youngster's struggle to assume the outer self of conformacy soon runs into trouble — because he finds it difficult to contain and control the troublesome anxiety that readily breaks down the thin veil of conformity with which he struggles to adorn himself. Such youngsters have weak psychological strength which is reflected in the inadequacy of their academic and social role functioning. All individuals have selective emotional processes that make role functioning successful in one situation but unsuccessful in another. In the cultural milieu of the school, marked pressure and anxiety often accompany the process of social adaptation. In the case of the troubled youngster anxiety tends to increase the instability or rigidity of his desirable student role functioning. Again he finds himself abreacting the loneliness, hostility, competitive strivings, survival doubts, and insecurity in group living which was earlier fostered in the family with its social deficiencies, and confused inconsistent norms. (Ackerman)

The staff of the Bleuler Psychotherapy Center have always felt that the treatment and educational management of a "troubled" and "troublesome youngster" require a multi-disciplinary approach.

We feel that the emotional and social adjustment of these youngsters form the essential gateway of promotion of their academic and vocational adjustment. As psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists, we are as concerned about the youngster's academic and vocational adjustment as his teachers, and want to offer our insights and services, pertaining to human development and behavior.

Through these supportive approaches we feel the teacher's role of educating these youngsters for wholesome emotional, social and vocational adjustment can be enhanced.

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